

*IJAPS, Vol. 13, No. 2, 73–91, 2017*



## **"WE ARE THE WORLD ITSELF": THE CONSTRUCTION OF "GOOD" CITIZENSHIP AND DEVIATIONS FROM IT IN *ERGO PROXY***

*Arnab Dasgupta\**

Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 110067, India  
email: [arnabdasgupta2789@gmail.com](mailto:arnabdasgupta2789@gmail.com)

Published online: 15 July 2017

To cite this article: Dasgupta, A. 2017. "We are the world itself": The construction of good citizenship and deviations from it in *Ergo Proxy*. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 13 (2): 73–91, <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2017.13.2.4>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2017.13.2.4>

### **ABSTRACT**

*Anime is the dominant medium of pop-culture expression in modern Japan, lending itself readily to genres such as romance and comedy, as well as advanced concepts of social and political discourse. At the same time, the rise of modern anime, especially science fiction anime coincided with the coming to the forefront of the issue of immigration. This article attempts to understand how the two phenomena may be intertwined in the dialectical process of analysing and re-analysing national identity and belonging, through a critical interpretation of the anime series Ergo Proxy, released in 2006. The ideas outlined below are relevant both to critical discourse studies and for prospective solutions in the field of immigration policy. With Japan's economy going into a tailspin due to the explosion of the housing bubble in the 1990s, coupled with the detrimental effects of negative population growth, more and more industries found themselves reliant on immigrant labour for their survival, even as national political winds blew decisively against opening the country to immigrants, due to unforeseen effects on "the Japanese way of life." As Japan entered the second decade of its persistent recessionary state, and the government remained impassive to calls issued from several quarters of society to liberalise immigration policy, even though many of these workers were urgently required in such important sectors as construction and healthcare, clinging instead to outdated racist notions of "pure Japaneseness," a trickle of foreign workers continued to enter Japan, becoming subject to abuse and human rights violations as their existence continues to be systematically erased. The cultural intelligentsia of*

*Japan did not long remain unaware of this fact, however, and has remained active in depicting the plight of immigrants in various genres of creative production.*

**Keywords:** Anime, cultural studies, *Ergo Proxy*, immigration, Japan

## INTRODUCTION

Immigration is an urgent issue in Japan. Since the 1980s, a trickle of foreign workers has been entering the country on a variety of visa categories, both legal and illegal, taking advantage of Japan's "internationalisation" (*kokusaika*) boom. These immigrants joined pre-existing populations of Korean and Chinese citizens, who had been living in Japan since before the war and had traumatic stories of their own to tell, stories of forced labour relocation, oppression and cultural assimilation. Newer immigrants, though technically coming under the category of economic labour, protected by international norms encapsulated in Japan's ratification of United Nations instruments relating to human rights, cultural protections and economic security, were in fact merely the newest addition to a long trail of immigrants and refugees who had entered Japan in the hopes of a safe haven to live and work, only to find themselves stuck in a nation that did not want them, did not know what to do with them and could not make heads or tails of their rights. In the face of this institutionalised disregard, immigrants, displaying their typical ingenuity, managed to survive, carving out small niches for themselves in spaces the government and the native population could not control.

Over time, as Japan's demographic bomb exploded, leading to an implosion of the social balance due to historically low birth rates and unexpectedly high life expectancies, and the economy went into a tailspin after the housing market collapsed on the back of excessive speculation, the country became the first developed member of advanced nations to reach a post-industrial, post-capitalist stage of limbo, where neither agriculture nor manufacturing was sustaining national lifestyles, and the services sector remained underdeveloped—and more importantly, helplessly parochial, as cultural norms handicapped its viability as a regional and global services powerhouse fully integrated into the global economy. Aggravating this scenario was a profound negativity towards the processes of evolution and change, resulting in a long-lasting economic depression that affected nearly every sector of the industry, along with all of society. Rigidity in attitudes toward modernisation and liberalisation, originating in the boom years of the 1960s and 1970s, became a crutch hobbling industries in the secondary and

tertiary sector, crippling the speed of recovery by deadlocking nearly every measure institutional authorities could take to do so.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the dual structure of the Japanese domestic manufacturing economy, which rapidly lost its *raison d'être* and subsided into inefficiency and high turnover, which was the niche filled by immigrants. At the same time, the government remained so enamoured of its own doctrine of cultural homogeneity leading to global supremacy that it failed to appreciate the need for immigrants where they could count and erected instead strong barriers against immigrants of nearly all stripes, seeing in them an existential threat to some notional Japanese "uniqueness" instead of an opportunity to achieve a more nuanced, richer conception of "being Japanese." In effect, the Japanese state and the people who support it behaved (and continue to behave) *culturally* in response to a phenomenon that is *political/economic* in nature.

Within this general mainstream of rejection of immigrants, there are voices which stand out in their positive depiction of these same immigrants. There are many who embrace the cultural openness immigrants bring to local neighbourhoods and wider urban societies, the splash of colour they bring to an otherwise monocultural sphere of existence. Of these some have been artists, who have used their art, their power to tell stories through paint, colour, form and word to introduce their fellow-citizens to immigrants and the lives they live, away from the public glare, many silently toiling away at their jobs, building things that consumers in Japan and all around the world enjoy. These expressions of sympathy, of co-existence, no doubt attract often diametrically opposite views, but undeniably continue to be powerful vehicles for the thinking about, and making sense of, the other that is an intrinsic function of every art form.

Anime as a genre of popular art is not an exception, and has been profoundly impacted by debates on immigration and citizenship issues. More importantly, it has provided a two-dimensional sounding board on which alternative visions of past, present and future Japan are shown, analysed and constructed. Science fiction, dealing with the future, lends itself particularly well to the medium of anime, since its stylistic and technological dimensions can be most freely expressed in the unrealistic atmosphere of anime. But whereas hard science fiction, dealing with matters of a technological and scientific nature, excel particularly well there, soft science fiction dealing with the socio-political impacts of technological advancements is also a well-suited genre that anime has exploited particularly well. One example of a synthesis of both genres is the science fiction anime series *Ergo Proxy* (2006), which will be dealt with in the following lines.

## ENTERING A CRITICAL DYSTOPIA

*Ergo Proxy* belongs to the wider genre of cultural production in literature and film that is known as the critical dystopia, which draws breath from the long-hallowed traditions of dystopian literature. Originating in the late 19th century, dystopian literature dealt overtly with what Murphy calls a "negative utopia," the absolute opposite of the utopian trope employed by Defoe and Verne (Murphy 2011: 473). In dystopian tales, the focus was often on the exploration—and subversion of—the earnest desire of societies to achieve perfection, and it was made clear at the outset that though the spatio-temporal location of the dystopian society may be far away, it is the inevitable product of a set of choices made by today's leaders and the societies they represent. Dystopia thus proved to be a fertile medium to criticise contemporary politics through an allegorical lens that remained sufficiently removed from the circumstances so as to avoid government censorship.

This is not to say, however, that dystopian literature was meant to snuff out hope. It was merely meant as a warning, a lighthouse warning those who steered the ship of the state to stay away from rocky shoals. In this it was different from the works of anti-utopia, which set out with the explicit objective of "critiqu[ing] and nullify[ing] utopian hope" (Murphy 2011). Works such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's masterpiece *1984* (1949) were all aimed at specific audiences, warning them to desist from the alternative of their actions, especially if those resulted in the formation of totalitarian states with fixed ideologies. It is no surprise that most of these works emerged from the period immediately after World War II, because the ideological conflict between the superpowers, each espousing world-spanning ideologies, proved particularly fruitful for the proliferation of cautionary tales involving one conceit or the other.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, side by side with the anti-war counter-culture movement, there arose a reactionary wave of oppositional (or critical) utopia (Bacciolini and Moylan 2003a: 2). Taking inspiration from the burgeoning ecological and feminist movements, authors such Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy and Samuel R. Delany brought fresh perspectives to bear on the science fiction genre, eschewing dystopian themes in favour of more optimistic scenarios, where idyllic realms emerged from global war and female members of the human race flourished atop the bones of their male counterparts. No longer was utopia as unblemished as in the earlier days of Butler and Defoe, but neither was it the grim totalitarian future envisaged by Wells and Orwell.

This period was not to last, because the reheating of tensions between the USA and the USSR, coupled with growing fears of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) meant that the political again intruded on the creative, this time in the form of a revival of dystopian literature in the 1980s (Bacciolini and Moylan 2003a: 3). A new generation of authors emerged, who dealt with new themes of societal collapse and totalitarian consolidation, taking as their point of departure not the conventional tropes of war and peace, but rather technological over-advancement and environmental crises. The former was the preserve of the cyberpunk genre, which blended high technology with classical themes of paranoia and deceit, both as state policy and individual relations. The latter grew out of the works of authors such as Margaret Atwood, whose *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), though not a work of science fiction *per se*, borrowed heavily from dystopian themes. It was also at this time that *1984* was finally filmed, bringing the horrors of totalitarian Oceania to theatre screens all over the world.

Out of this dialectical contest between critical utopia and classical dystopia emerged the synthesis: critical dystopia, a product of the 1990s. From its very inception, critical dystopian texts set out to "negate the 1980s negation of the critical utopian moment and thus make room for a new expression of the utopian imagination" (Bacciolini and Moylan 2003a: 7). In effect, critical dystopia was the true antithesis of critical utopia of the 1970s, because it in effect reclaimed the same territory as the site for its contestation with the latter. Works by Octavia E. Butler and Pat Cadigan were meant as warnings, as rumblings of an oncoming storm that could destroy humanity as presently constituted; in this they belonged properly to the classical dystopian genre. Where they differed was in the "retriev[al] [of] the progressive possibilities inherent in dystopian narrative" by "allow[ing] both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure" (Bacciolini and Moylan 2003a: 7–8). Critical dystopian texts were, therefore, stuck in an "impure" limbo between utopia and dystopia, because they blended them both in an attempt to show that hegemonies were not ossified monoliths but rather systems of oppression shot through with holes that could be exploited by determined individuals to achieve far-reaching change (Donawerth, in Bacciolini and Moylan 2003a). The predominant trope of the critical dystopia thus became the depiction of how an initially totalitarian or anarchic future could be converted into more palatable alternatives by acts of active and passive resistance, especially by members of oppressed underclasses who are denied their agency and voice by a systematic campaign of dehumanisation.



Given the historical period of the present, the urgency of artistic works dealing with the gradual loss of humanity, of its values and its foundations, in the hasty pursuit of instant technological gratification and the recrudescence of human identities into isolated essentials, becomes unimpeachably relevant. That critical dystopia remains relevant, and popular, in modern popular culture can be seen from the ubiquity of the genre since its founding, with authors adapting its tenets to effective use across ideologies (such as the eco-feminism of Charnas's *Holdfast* series (Cavalcanti, in Bacciolini and Moylan 2003a)) as well as media (comics, films, plays, etc.). What is more, critical dystopia now commands a global reach and relevance, as seminal works of visual media such as Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* (1988) and Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) reveal. The subject of this article, Murase and Satō's *Ergo Proxy*, is also of a piece with this genre, and the following lines will explore how this anime partakes of generic tropes to voice the voiceless (in this case, immigrants).

### ***ERGO PROXY* AS A CRITICAL DYSTOPIA: AN EXPLORATION**

*Ergo Proxy* (Murase 2006) is a Japanese cyberpunk science fiction anime spanning 25 episodes which aired in Japan between February and July 2006 in Japan. Directed by Shukō Murase, the series was based on a manga written by Yumiko Harao, published serially in Monthly Sunday-GX from the 18 February 2006 issue. Harao's manga was adapted for the screen by Dai Satō and a team of other screenwriters working on individual episodes. Under the direction of Murase, several episodes were directed by other directors, including Akira Yoshimura (Episode 9), Satoshi Toba (5 episodes) and Tatsuya Igarashi (Episodes 3, 13, 20). Music for the series was provided by Yoshihiro Ike, while the distinctive art was handled by Naoyuki Onda (character design), Takashi Aoi and Kazuhiro Yamada (director of photography). The principal characters were voiced by Koji Yusa (Vincent Law), Rie Saitō (Re-l Mayer), Hikaru Hanada (Raul Creed) and Akiko Yajima (Pino). The broadcaster of the series is the WOWOW channel, while production was done by a consortium of anime studios including Geneon Entertainment Inc., Manglobe (which owns the rights to the manga), Rondo Robe and WOWOW (Anime News Network n.d.).

After its release in Japan, the anime DVD was subsequently dubbed into other languages for international broadcast and sales. In the English-speaking world, broadcasting was handled by Animax (South Africa), FUNimation

Entertainment, Fuse TV and G4TechTV Canada. FUNimation also handled distribution along with Madman Entertainment (Australia and New Zealand), MVM (UK) and Universal Sony Home Pictures. The anime was also dubbed into French (broadcasters Game one and Gong; distributor Dybex), Spanish (broadcasters Animax Spain, Buzz Channel and LAPTV; distributor Alter Films), Italian (broadcaster Rai 4; distributor Panini Film Italia), German (broadcaster Animax Germany; distributors Nipponart and SP Vision), Russian (distributor MC Entertainment) and Polish (broadcaster Canal+; distributor Vision Film Distribution Sp. Z.o.o.) (Anime News Network n.d.).

*Ergo Proxy* has received great support and critical acclaim since its release. Its IMDb entry rates it 8.1 out of 10 (IMDb n.d.), while TV.com rates it higher, at 8.7 out of 10 (Deersshadow n.d.). Amazon.com users have rated it 4.5 out of 5, with 67 percent voting for 5 stars. The series was also positively received by bloggers; T.H.E.M. Anime Reviews (themanime.org) rates it 4 out of 5, comparing it to *Serial Experiments Lain* and *Ghost in the Shell* in terms of content, while faulting the anime for its slow pace and inconsistencies in design (T.H.E.M. Anime Reviews n.d.). Another blog, The Nihon Review (nihonreview.com) rates it 7 out of 10, appreciating the "hauntingly beautiful and enigmatic" music, strong characterisations and "weighty" philosophical content, while critiquing its ending (AC n.d.). Anime News Network (animenewsnetwork.com) gives *Ergo Proxy* an overall grade of B+, calling it "a fine addition to the genre," "a top-shelf title that any high-minded sci-fi fan [...] will probably enjoy" (Santos 2012).

The present study will approach *Ergo Proxy* from a critical studies perspective, which is to say it will consider the series not as a work of art but as a product conveying the ideas, opinions and policy stands of the creators, as well as accepting in an implicit manner the receptivity of the audience as indirect endorsement of its message. The focus of the study will be on the portrayals of the varied facets of citizenship depicted by the principal characters of the series. The following sections will deal with the varied sites, ideologies and characters in the series which provide insights into understanding the underlying message of the creators. The relevant points in the storyline will be critically interpreted as a semiotic text with real-world application.

## ROMDEAU: THE LAST ARK

The ark city of Romdeau is the centrepiece of the series, where most of the principal characters reside and begin their journeys. It is also the place

where the story meets its denouement, with the promise of a brave new world built atop its destroyed ruins. Consider its geographical features: Romdeau is a hermeneutically-sealed ark city, self-sufficient into itself and containing within itself a citizenry which goes about its daily life unperturbed by external interference. This citizenry is shown to be affluent, self-satisfied and suitably compliant toward the ultimate sources of authority resident in the Regent, Donovan Mayer, and his artificial intelligence (AI) shadow cabinet (each named after a prominent 20th century philosopher, Kristeva and Kierkegaard being prominent examples). Around the "dome" of Romdeau stretches a wasteland which is viewed by those within as *terra nullius*, the site of dragons and unimaginable tragedies. Also important is the fact that this self-same citizenry is hopelessly dependent on robotic AutoReivs who pander to their every whim, and remains blissfully unaware of the reality of its existence, revealed only to the principal characters by the end of the story: namely, that the citizens of Romdeau are in fact endlessly-repetitive clones of the original human population, assembly-line echoes of an original humanity which died in the "calamity" of nuclear holocaust an indeterminate time before the events of the story. What is more, their saviour, the entity that gave them life and secured their livelihood is the inhuman Proxy, servant of God the Creator, sent down from the heavens to protect humanity from assured destruction. This god-like being, however, is so universally reviled and misunderstood that it chooses to leave its creations and emigrate to another domed city. Upon its return, as Vincent Law, this immigrant as Father is not only unrecognised; he is hunted by the security apparatus and ultimately ejected. In Vincent's own words, he "fails to become a good citizen" (Episode 1).

To the viewer concerned with the deconstruction of its symbolic significance, Romdeau can be effectively said to stand for the creators' conception of Japan. Isolated from the Asian mainland, to the point that political regimes in the past could choose what social, political and cultural features to integrate into the national mainstream, Japan has always considered itself to be separate from and (overtly during the historical periods between 1603 and 1853 and 1910 to 1945) superior to its distant neighbours on the mainland. Nowadays, despite several warning signs issued by local and international commentators, politicians and academics about the absolute urgency of accepting immigration into Japan in quantities ranging from thousands to the hundreds of thousands, mainstream media outlets, internet forums and public discussion continue to equate the immigrant not with a valuable economic entity, source of social capital or a "citizen-in-waiting" (to borrow the title of a book by Hiroshi Motomura on immigration and citizenship law) but as a threat



to the social fabric of Japan's "unique" system, whose incorporation would reduce something "essential" in the identity of "Japaneseness." The Japanese government continues to officially suppress immigration and citizenship for foreign populations, while proposals to "robotise" and "mechanise" such sectors as office work and care for the elderly are seriously investigated.

Even those foreigners who manage to surpass Japan's tough immigration requirements, either legally or illegally, are treated socially as perpetually foreign. Like the refugees of Romdeau, they are expected at all times to perform their foreignness in public in ways that may in fact be a source of considerable confusion to the younger generation which may have acclimatised itself to its destination country's mores. The native population remains apathetic at best, and hostile at worst, giving rise to several public incidents of harassment and assault with a racial bent. Meanwhile, the granting of the (elusive) citizenship status is hedged about by vague requirements of "adaptability to the Japanese way of life," whose parameters are set in an ad hoc way and applied on a case-by-case basis, which means there is no standardised set of milestones the future citizen-immigrant can aim to achieve in order to receive citizenship. Romdeau's system is essentially the fictional counterpart of this system, which the creators of *Ergo Proxy* set up in the series, only to eventually upend it by introducing the placid members of their fictional collective to the truth of their origin as the progeny of an artificial decision by an immigrant founder to settle and raise his community there. The knowledge of this shared origin as ancient immigrants tears the fragile fabric of the domed city apart, as Romdeau collapses under the weight of its failure to survive as a viable community of human beings rising out of nuclear devastation. It takes the return (for the third time) of the original immigrant founder, Vincent Law/*Ergo Proxy*, for hope of an eventual revitalisation to emerge.

## VINCENT LAW: THE IMMIGRANT AS FOUNDER

Vincent Law is the male protagonist of the series, the subject and agent of the whole narrative, whose journey of rediscovery of himself, both as the Othered Proxy of the title as well as his role as the founder of the ark of Romdeau, saviour of the human race, forms the chief vehicle for conveying its principal ideas. Vincent is the subject through which the series interrogates and problematises the existing narratives revolving around immigration, citizenship and the quest for a common origin prevalent throughout the elite in Romdeau, which, as has already been shown, stands as a metonym for Japan.

At the beginning of the series, the viewer sees Vincent working in a basement as part of a team that captures and repairs AutoReivs infected with a virus which gives them a conscience. He is called in by Re-l Mayer, who represents the security architecture of the state, to shed some light on a recent spate of events which involve him being seen in close proximity to the mysterious beings known as Proxies. Visibly nervous, he professes himself confused and attempts to show himself an honest worker who has kept his head down and tried his best to obey the dictates of the government of Romdeau, in order to finally attain the mantle of being a "good citizen" and be able to move up in life. As the investigation into Vincent's role deepens throughout the episode, both Re-l and Vincent realise that he is in reality something else altogether. His ensuing pursuit by members of the security architecture, led by Re-l, leads Vincent to make a fateful decision and voluntarily exile himself from Romdeau by throwing himself out the airlock of the domed city. The entire time, he exists in shadow, hovering about in the pipes and underground tunnels of the city, serving the "good citizens" above while remaining uncomplaining, invisible.

In later episodes, as Vincent picks himself back up and commences a journey back towards the domed city of Mosk from which he believes himself to have emerged originally, he encounters people and circumstances (sometimes bordering on the hallucinatory) which make him aware of his true self. In a pivotal episode (episode 9), he meets another Proxy, the Proxy of Sunlight, who fights him initially, but upon recognising him, reveals to him the truth: that he is a Proxy, a being created by unknown powers, each given charge over a "flock" of humans to save and restore. This shocking revelation unsettles Vincent's identity and self at first; for a moment he sees himself clearly as both the monstrous Proxy and the harmless, diligent Vincent. In ensuing episodes, initially alone then joined by Re-l, Vincent successfully pieces together the remaining shards of his past, to reconstruct an identity of his own. In the process, he comes to see what he is in relation to the city of Romdeau and learns that his present exile is the third of his attempts to liberate himself of his creation.

In the final third of the series, as Vincent and Re-l return to Romdeau to save it from destruction, Vincent is finally revealed by the elites of Romdeau as the Founder of the city who eventually grew disgusted with it and decided to leave. Yet for emotional reasons he continued to return to the city as a lowly immigrant, only being rejected by a hostile population which failed to recognise its own progenitor. Even in Mosk, where Vincent/Ergo Proxy takes refuge, the population of Romdeau wages a war to recover him, but

only to contain him, to imprison him so that he may continue to be "useful" to the city as the producer of more human beings through the cloning process. Above all there exists the important truth that the same elites, particularly the Regent, Re-l's "grandfather" Donovan Mayer, knew of their immigrant origin and purposefully effaced this part of their history in order to retain people's faith in the system of political control built up around them. The immigrant Founder of the state is thus himself made subject to its mechanisms of control and regulation.

Vincent in Romdeau is thus the Othered part of the city's history, whose role in the origin of its people is conveniently removed without trace by the state in order to cement its control over their minds and champion an ideology which in the series comes eerily close to emulating the exhortations of the *Nihonjinron* genre of Japanese literature, which harps on the "uniqueness" of Japanese culture as the foundational principle of its success in the economic sphere. The immigrant, though he is effectively repeating the journey made by the ancestors of the Japanese/Romdeauites, is only ever useful in the underclass of economic production, where he/she is useful in a limited sense, as long as he/she remains dispensable and invisible to the citizenry. By placing this immigrant (in this case Vincent Law) in a fixed position legally, by constraining him within the boundaries of "manageable" structures (prison, the workshop, outside the physical borders of the territory of the state) and by denying him/her the voice and agency to claim and reconstitute him/herself as a valuable unit of the national fabric, an important member of the national fraternity, and as a human being with rights and values, the state of Romdeau/Japan thus effectively denies its origins in prehistoric immigration patterns in favour of a limited, conservative ethno-racial conception of itself as a monoethnic, monolingual nation-state continuing in a pure form from the mists of history to the present day.

## RE-L MAYER: THE NATIVE WHO WENT IMMIGRANT

If Vincent Law is the Othered origin of Romdeau, Re-l Mayer, security agent, adopted granddaughter of the Regent and a former member of the political elite who turns on her own people for the truth, is the hopeful vehicle for the future. As envisioned by the creators of *Ergo Proxy*, Re-l, the initially prickly unfeminine officer, becomes by the end a feminised "super-female," who essays a dual role as both the amanuensis of Vincent's journey and the potential foundress of a new human society after the destruction of Romdeau,

in a procreative dyad with the Othered immigrant Vincent Law. In sum, Re-l is the native who accepts the immigrant into her body, both physically and symbolically as a human being in the shared confraternity of human beings.

In the sense considered above, Re-l's femininity is important to the storytellers. The existence of a female protagonist, through whose eyes the viewer experiences the torment of Vincent/Ergo Proxy, serves to impart an affective legitimacy to Vincent's reclaiming of his split personality. At the same time, Re-l's presence, particularly her personal emotional development, attempts to instil faith in the change that Vincent promises would come in the final episode; Re-l's being at his side will ensure a more even-handed, fairer world where the artificiality of Romdeau's technology-aided reproduction would be replaced by a "natural" order of sexually generated humanity which would (purportedly) claim for itself a "pure" status free of distinctions between immigrants and natives. Thus Re-l Mayer reifies the conception of the nation/collective/human race as products of a "universal mother" in whose body the potential for change may gestate.

In the initial half of the series, Re-l is shown as a loyal and intelligent security officer whose keen eye and critical faculties enable her to see the problem of Romdeau's growing AutoReiv problem more clearly than all others. When Ergo Proxy's existence is revealed to her in a shocking home invasion at the end of the first episode, Re-l, instead of giving in to human feelings of antipathy and trauma, begins to analyse the Proxy's seeming interest in her, honestly confessing to the audience that that interest is fully reciprocated. Later on, when her duty forces her to chase down Vincent, she attempts to arrest him with tact, resisting to the very end the use of force. After the truth of Vincent's identity and the source of Romdeau's citizens is revealed to her by Daedalus in a later episode, she resolves to go out into the wilderness outside Romdeau to look for Vincent, to interrogate him and (if necessary) kill him. However, when she catches up to him, Vincent saves her life instead. This marks the point where Re-l begins her journey of discovery, one potentially challenging her own long-held beliefs and the threat potential Vincent seems to pose.

Over time, as their journey leads to deeper and more desolate places, the bond between Re-l and Vincent metamorphoses from a wary distrust into a lasting companionship, emblematised by an episode where they are stranded in a deserted place with no wind to propel their wind-driven ship. By the final episodes, Re-l becomes the first person to accept the broken halves of Vincent's identity, propelling him to return to Romdeau to save it instead of destroying it. She becomes his moral centre, arming him for a final

confrontation with his own alternate self, which advocates the final destruction of Romdeau by the Proxy's hands. After the climactic battle is done, Vincent, the immigrant returned to the land of his founding, stands atop the ruins of his creation; his sight of Re-l returning to him in their ship forms the background to his vow to rebuild a new society again, thus (indirectly) investing Re-l with regenerative capacities not only in a physical sense, but also as a moral compass, a role that presents direct comparisons with Meiji era exhortations to create "good wives, wise mothers" (*ryōsai kenbo*) as the source of a new generation of loyal, disciplined and intelligent citizens who would lead Japan into modernity.

It cannot be guessed as to whether the anime producers wanted at this point to show a return to the essential core of culture as imperative to national rejuvenation, or to indicate a radically progressive vision of the role of women to subvert and—through their roles as wives and mothers (of immigrant men and their children)—challenge the exclusionary principles of Japan's almost-xenophobic immigration policy, but Re-l's character trajectory may be said to stand most simplistically to signify the advantages of what in the field of immigration studies is called "contact theory," which argues that contact with immigrants has a direct positive relation with attitudes towards them in personal life; essentially, the more natives see immigrants navigating the same environmental challenges they do, the more they come to see the latter as fellow-travellers, not as threats (Green and Kadoya 2015). Re-l can thus be read as a metonym for Japanese people at large, who if only they could see immigrants in their daily lives and emotional turmoil, would realise the common humanity of both groups and come to give the latter a more basic role in the construction of Japanese-ness in an era of rapid aging and globalised migration.

## **RAUL CREED: THE (PERSONAL) SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT**

If Re-l Mayer represents the benign face of Romdeau's security establishment, her boss Raul Creed represents its xenophobic mainstream. Through his character, the creators of *Ergo Proxy* attempt to delineate a sort of "banal evil" (Arendt 2006) as envisioned by Hannah Arendt, a functionary who loses sight of the humanity of the immigrants under his supervision in favour of a functional, and then an overtly emotional reaction against one immigrant in particular, i.e., Vincent Law. The trajectory of his character is emblematic of the security establishment he represents, an establishment which sees



immigrants not in terms of their intrinsic human value but as potential threats and subversive agents, to the point that it begins to drive a xenophobic knee-jerk counter-reaction toward immigration at large irrespectively of its economic and demographic benefits. This hyperactive domination of immigration policymaking by the security establishment leads to the irrelevance of Romdeau/Japan at first, and eventually to its summary destruction in the final episode of the series.

When the audience first encounters Creed, he comes across as a coldly efficient functionary with a mandate to maintain surveillance on all citizens of Romdeau for signs of "deviance." This mandate includes identifying defective AutoReivs and "fixing" (i.e., destroying) them. In the first episode, though, the battle of the Proxies in the central shopping district causes a defining break in Creed's pathology as his wife and child are caught in the crossfire and killed. Throughout the ensuing series, Creed's blinding desire for revenge against the Proxies causes him to fall further and further into doubt regarding the essential purpose of his and others' lives. This doubt is exacerbated by Daedalus, who shows him the "truth" of Romdeau's artificial population growth. Armed with the knowledge of life's essential meaninglessness, Creed eventually devotes all the resources at his disposal to hunt down Vincent Law, whom he sees haunting him in several telling hallucinatory sequences. The Regent's removal of his powers and authority only makes him more determined, and he eventually becomes the agent of the system's demise when he triggers the Legacy, one last nuclear missile left over from pre-apocalyptic times, over Romdeau, causing its protective dome to collapse and its civilisation to come to an end. When he receives news of Vincent/Ergo Proxy's return, he goes to the Regent's chamber and fires bullets containing life-threatening FP cells at his hated enemy, only to realise that the enemy is more resourceful and more powerful than him. After his "nominal" revenge is taken, Creed wanders aimlessly through the runs of Romdeau until his accidental death.

The character of Raul Creed offers to the student of citizenship and immigration a valuable example of the security establishment of "anti-immigration" countries such as Japan and the functionaries who serve as its gatekeepers. His cold attitude towards the immigrants who serve as Romdeau's underclass, his inveterate hatred toward Vincent Law and his eventual decision to prefer the destruction of his homeland to his fellow citizens learning the truth about their origins are all mirrored to some extent in the attitudes and policy behaviours of immigration bureaucrats in real-life Japan, who along with the ministers above them, stoke the public's nativist attitudes even at the cost of national decrepitude (and eventual decline). Recent initiatives by the Japanese

government, such as automation of certain tasks as well as incorporating women into the workforce through the so-called "womenomics," are indicative of this fatalist attitude towards replenishment of national populations by immigration, which accentuates perceived security concerns and difficulties of integration as obstacles to immigration while ignoring the historical inevitability of immigration, its benefits and complexities. The national discourse is thus posed as a straightforward nation vs. outsiders (the literal meaning of *gaijin*) debate, instead of allowing pro- and anti-migrant interests to dispute immigrants' viability in terms of their respective standpoints.

The Japanese government's negative attitudes towards immigrants have a historical dimension as well. Opponents of immigration within the government (of which the security establishment is one) often argue their opposition by drawing comparisons with the United States, which is a country of immigrants and thus the opposite of Japan. This argument, drawing from years of *Nihonjinron* discourse and official government support to the concept of *tan'itsu minzoku kokka* (literally translated as racially homogeneous nation), has been the mainstay of official circles since Nakasone Yasuhiro proclaimed in a public speech his nation's superiority over the United States because of the latter's lax immigration policies allowing blacks, Puerto Ricans and other poor immigrants to stay and work there (Page 1986). However, as detailed historical data proves, Japan itself has been home to populations from Asia, Polynesian islanders and Australasian aborigines, who combined prior to recorded history to form the much-vaunted Yamato race that Japanese political functionaries tout today as a "pure" race. Even in recorded history, several thousands of Koreans and Chinese were captured and brought to Japan for their skills; these craftspeople were no doubt incorporated into the Japanese population, since their descendants are now unidentifiable as members of that special group.

Seen from the contexts noted above, Creed's behaviour seems to be more explainable. Like the real bureaucrats on whom he seems to be modelled, he not only harbours an atavistic hatred for immigrants but also resents the fact of their value to society. As such his hatred for Vincent Law can be interpreted as having two reasons: by failing to become an anonymous, compliant Fellow Citizen, in effect by refusing to sublimate his individuality to the corporate group of the state, Vincent Law has shown himself to be a typical outsider/foreigner/immigrant, a threat to the security of the nation. Not only that, Vincent has been revealed to be the Proxy, founder of Romdeau, father of all its citizens and emissary of the past, making his presence a threat to the official shibboleths of the state, which declaims that Romdeau/Japan is a self-contained population free of intermixing with "foreign" races. From this

perspective it is no wonder that Creed's rebellion encompasses both Vincent Law, the representative of the past, of the common origins of all humanity after the apocalypse, and of Romdeau, Vincent's creation, which he sees as the contaminated paradise. By striving to destroy both, Creed may in fact be striving to achieve the perfect purity, an unsullied *tabula rasa* where *tan'itsu minzoku kokka* may be established free of the taint of association with the foreign "barbarian." His failure can thus be read as the failure of the state to hold the gates, to argue against the inevitability of human immigration.

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to estimate how many unique viewers eventually watched *Ergo Proxy*, because it was released as a DVD simultaneously with broadcast on a satellite television channel, which is dependent on subscribers. A search of interviews conducted with the creators has made amply clear that they were influenced by the Christian doctrine of Manicheanism and sought to construct a morality tale of dystopian proportions (see Scally, Drummond-Matthews and Hairston 2009), but none of the interviews have made entirely clear where the inspiration for the realistic depiction of issues of immigration and citizenship came from or even whether they were intentional. A search of the existing literature in academic circles also reveals nothing; most students of immigration studies remain unaware of the critical potential *Ergo Proxy* (and a handful of other series like it) holds for those specialising in emergent countries of immigration, almost all of which are so-called monoethnic, monolingual states without traditions of mass immigration in modern times (such as Italy, Spain, Greece and Japan).

*Ergo Proxy*, and indeed other anime produced across studios in Japan, nevertheless offers rich dividends for these students. Firstly, it problematises the existing immigration policy espoused by the political apparatus in Japan, which attempts to display a veneer of control even in the face of dire demographic crises, relying on wishful thinking due to cultural sensitivities instead of taking a dispassionate look at all the options available to the government. Romdeau's destruction comes about because instead of confronting and internalising its history, its citizens and elites wish to remain in denial about the source of salvation that their refugee underclass represent and stress their purity instead. In light of Romdeau's (fictional) experiences, the producers of *Ergo Proxy* seem to be warning real-life Japanese audiences of the folly of clinging to outdated concepts of racial purity when a real crisis is facing them.

Secondly, *Ergo Proxy* sends up a cautionary flare to the political elite by threatening nothing less than irrelevance or (in the worst instance) the destruction of the nation-state if changes to the immigration policy are not made. The producers of the anime, by showing how Creed ends up enacting the destruction of the stable polity of Romdeau because the boundary between the personal and the political ceases to be relevant for him, are possibly indicating that several real cases of official misconduct by several immigration authorities and detention centre officers may just be the tip of the iceberg, because they may indicate a sense of racial superiority that is at odds with the sensitivity which Japanese politicians believe remains Japan's greatest diplomatic weapon. As such, the anime it can be said argues for a humanitarian approach towards immigrants, instead of the cycle of violence which Creed unleashes by blaming Vincent Law for all the problems the former's society faces.

Thirdly, *Ergo Proxy* unveils the potential that recent advances in social psychology such as contact theory hold in changing public attitudes toward immigrants. Throughout the series, the audience is able to see with their own eyes how increasing contact with Vincent makes Re-l change her preconceived attitudes and private fears about the alien in her society, leading her to ultimately accept Vincent as her mate and equal. That this act of acceptance, mirrored in the real world, would end the underground lives most immigrants to Japan still live, and enable them to access their rights in a manner free of fear or favour seems to be the primary contention of the creators of the anime.

Finally, and most importantly, however, *Ergo Proxy* attempts to humanise the immigrant, not just by showing him as a silent, compliant victim enmeshed in a system which needs him at the same time as it refuses to grant him the needs of self-activation that is enjoyed by full citizens, but also as a successor to the true past: a past of itinerant immigrants, ancestors of the same citizens who came to an unexplored land to settle it. By making an impassioned plea to respect the stranger as God (Yoshida 1981), to welcome the immigrant as a future citizen instead of as a tool, to respect his/her power to make and unmake the nation's common peace, prosperity and longevity, *Ergo Proxy* can in this reading be said to be pushing the idea of a critical dystopia for Japan's consideration, where the possibility of change exists and a better future is still around the corner.

## NOTES

- \* Arnab Dasgupta is an Indian citizen and resident in the national capital of Delhi. He is currently engaged in the production of his PhD thesis on Japan's immigration policy as it is perceived by the state as against civil society. He has Bachelors' and Masters' degrees in the Japanese language from the School of Languages, Literature and Culture, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India and has previously obtained an MPhil from the institution he is currently affiliated to, where his topic was the evolution of Japanese immigration policy from the period 2000–2012. He is a keen follower of Japan in world news and opinion, and is a devotee of Japanese food, anime, manga, music and films. He has been a recipient of numerous awards and scholarships awarded by the Government of India as well as the Japan Foundation and private institutions. His professional aim is to teach at a higher learning institution, and wants to do his part in building a bridge between the nations of East and Southeast Asia and India.

## REFERENCES

- AC. n.d. *Ergo Proxy*. <http://www.thenihonreview.com/anime/ergo-proxy/> (accessed 16 May 2016).
- Anime News Network. n.d. *Ergo Proxy* (TV). <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/anime.php?id=5115> (accessed 17 May 2016).
- Arendt, H. 2006. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. London and New York: Penguin.
- Bacciolini, R. and Moylan, T. 2003a. Introduction: Dystopia and histories. In *Dark horizons: Science fiction and the dystopian imagination*, ed. Bacciolini, R. and Moylan, T. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2003b. Conclusion: Critical dystopia and possibilities. In *Dark horizons: Science fiction and the dystopian imagination*, ed. Bacciolini, Raffaella and Moylan, Tom. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cavalcanti, I. 2003. The writing of utopia and the feminist critical dystopia: Suzy McKee Charnas's Holdfast Series. In *Dark horizons: Science fiction and the dystopian imagination*, ed. Bacciolini, R. and Moylan, T. London and New York: Routledge.
- Deersadow. n.d. *Ergo Proxy*. <http://www.tv.com/shows/ergo-proxy/> (accessed 17 May 2016).
- Donawerth, J. 2003. Genre blending and the critical dystopia. In *Dark horizons: Science fiction and the dystopian imagination*, ed. Bacciolini, R. and Moylan, T. London and New York: Routledge.
- Green, D. and Kadoya, Y. 2015. Contact and threat: Factors affecting views on increasing immigration in Japan. *Politics and Policy* 43 (1): 59–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12109>.
- IMDb. n.d. *Ergo Proxy* (TV Series 2006- ). <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0791205/> (accessed 17 May 2016).
- Murase, S. 2006. *Ergo Proxy*. Tokyo: Manglobe.



- Murphy, G. J. 2011. Dystopia. In *The Routledge companion to science fiction*, ed. Bould, M. et al. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Page, C. 1986. Nakasone puts foot in melting pot. *Chicago Tribune*, 28 September.
- Santos, C. 2012. *Ergo Proxy* complete collection DVD – Review. <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/review/ergo-proxy/dvd-complete-series-anime-classics> (accessed 16 May 2016).
- Scally, D., Drummond-Matthews, A. and Hairston, M. 2009. Interview with Murase Shūkō and Satō Dai. *Mechademia* 9: 329–334, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.0.0064>.
- T.H.E.M Anime Reviews 4.0. 2006. *Ergo Proxy*. <http://www.themanime.org/viewreview.php?id=1377> (accessed 17 May 2016).
- Yoshida, T. 1981. The stranger as God: The place of the outsider in Japanese folk religion. *Ethnology* 20:2: 87–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3773058>.

